



Austin American-Statesman

June 1, 2013

Kelso: Now she sees your cash; now you don't

By John Kelso

If you come across a young woman blindfolded, wearing a turban and sitting in a chair on the sidewalk on South Congress, don't alert the authorities.

It's just Sofia Dyer, reading minds.

Sofia, 17, an honors student at the Liberal Arts and Science Academy, an Austin magnet school, is billed as "The Girl Who Knows."

Even though she can't see the card you picked out of the deck, she can name it. She knows what word you've selected out of an article in Time magazine. She can tell the names of people you've written on pieces of paper, even though she hasn't seen the pieces of paper and has never even heard of the people.

And she knows when she attends the University of Texas this fall as a freshman, she'll need money. So she's performing telepathic feats on the street to raise a few bucks for college. Hey, it's show business.

So far, Sofia has earned around \$1,800 in tips. She's been working SoCo for about a year, usually early on weekend evenings.

"I don't do so poorly," Sofia said. "I actually will be able to pay for some of the living costs for next year and also maybe the dorm."

To date, Sofia's biggest tip came from David Blaine, the world famous illusionist who had himself encased in a block of ice in Times Square. Well after he thawed out, Blaine just happened to be on South Congress, stopped to chat with Sofia, did a few magic tricks for her and gave her \$20.

Sofia was thrilled. "I actually have that \$20 bill in my room; I'm never spending that," she said. "He asked me some really weird questions. He asked me, 'Are you afraid of spiders?' I was kind of disoriented because I did not expect to see David Blaine."

She reads minds, and she didn't know he was about to arrive?

Sofia is no novice to magic. She started doing seances at the age of 9 at home Halloween parties with her dad, Jake Dyer, an amateur magician himself.

The seance routine, Sofia said, was occasionally unsettling, since she was just a kid and it was dark. "My brother threw yogurt in my face and I didn't know what it was, so I started screaming," she said.

The fake wooden knives dad Jake sticks in the box while Sofia's head is inside aren't frightening, though. It's an optical illusion. Although for dramatic effect on South Congress, Sophia lets out an "ow" with each knife. Jake says that when things get slow on SoCo, he drags out the box with the Pharaoh design and puts it on Sophia's head. That brings back the crowd, dad Jake says.

Reading minds on South Congress has been nothing but giggles. Jake works the crowds in a porkpie hat as Sofia's "bottler." The bottler is the person who gathers the "skeptics" to watch the performance and passes the hat. Groups of 20 or 30 commonly stop to watch Sofia do her thing.

"In the olden days, the bottler was performed by a trained monkey," said Jake, whose day job is consumer advocate/policy analyst working with the Texas Legislature. (The Legislature, huh? There's a trained monkey joke in there somewhere.)

Jake starts the show by asking the crowd to help Sofia by concentrating and sending vibes.

"Ladies and gentlemen, mind reading really is a group effort," Jake tells the audience. "Focus your mind. Can you send that mental image to Sofia?"

A woman with dark hair in her 30s is showing off a gold hoop she's wearing on her wrist. Blindfolded, Sofia will tell us what it is.

"I'm seeing a bright color, maybe the color yellow," Sofia says. "I'm getting a sense it's something for your wrist. A yellow wristband, or a bracelet?"

"She gets it right every time," Jake barks to the crowd. "The girl who knows. Every time she reads your mind."

I asked Sophia if sometimes she'll try to read a mind, and there's nothing there.

"Sometimes I'll try to predict an object and all I'll get is a meatball sandwich," she said.

So how does Sofia pick out, say, the queen of clubs? And how can she tell that the thing an audience member is displaying is, say, a cellphone or a business card? You expect a straight answer?

"As Kreskin would say, we believe it to be explainable by scientific principles," Jake says. He adds his daughter is thinking about going into neuroscience. That part you can believe.